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The Real Decisions

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IN THE NATION

A questioner at Henry Kissinger's news conference recalled that, for ten years and through three Administrations, mining the North Vietnamese harbors had been considered to pose an unacceptable risk of confrontation with the Soviet Union. "Can you tell us what has changed to make that risk now acceptable?" he asked.

If Dr. Kissinger could have he didn't. He said only that President Nixon's decision to mine the harbors was not "lightly arrived at" and that the judgment has been that the risks were not unacceptable.

But something indeed has changed. More or less concealed by Mr. Nixon's threatening bluster, Dr. Kissinger's plaintive laments, and all the optimistic headlines about a "new strategy" and the President's "hopes" is the fact that the Nixon policy in South Vietnam has been exposed as a miserable failure.

After three years of death and devastation in Indochina, after huge diversions of funds and energy from this country's real needs, and after nearly irrecoverable political damage among its people, the North Vietnamese have a greater military advantage than ever before, the Saigon Government is weaker, the peace negotiations are at an impasse, the P.O.W.'s are still imprisoned, the bombing of the North has been resumed, and the President—by Imperial fiat—has placed the nation in hazard of the gravest confrontation with the Soviets since the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. Even assuming that a half-million American troops have been brought home in the same period, this is failure on a grand scale.

It is failure, moreover, on at least three levels. Mr. Nixon and his advisers persistently overrated the fighting capacity and motivation of South Vietnamese forces, particularly their leaders. Just as consistently and disastrously, they underestimated the ability of the North Vietnamese to sustain an offensive of the kind now going forward.

Finally, Mr. Nixon not only misjudged the ability or the will of the Soviet Union to push Hanoi into a compromise settlement, but in Dr. Kissinger's words, Washington "also perhaps underestimated the massive influx of offensive weapons, particularly from the Soviet Union . . . that changed the military balance." This, after all the braggadocio as to how the Cambodian invasion of 1970 and the Laotian incursion of 1971 had disrupted North Vietnamese supply lines and assured the success of Vietnamization.

In fact, Richard Nixon's Vietnamization is as grandiose a failure as Lyndon Johnson's land war, and this failure is what has changed the President's mind about mining the North Vietnamese harbors. That action could have some future effect on Hanoi's forces now operating in the South; it retaliates against the Soviets for their arms aid to North Vietnam; and its sensational nature diverts attention from the real situation in the South.

It also puts Moscow, for the second time in a decade, in the position of having to face up to an American ultimatum. Can the Soviets really acquiesce in an American order not to enter Haiphong harbor on pain of having their ships blown up? Even if Mr. Nixon has been "humiliated" by the Soviet-supported North Vietnamese military success, is it sensible to try to push Moscow into the even more pointed humiliation of being barred from its ally's harbors? Does Mr. Nixon really expect the Soviets not only to accept this humiliation but then to persuade or coerce Hanoi into a settlement he can accept?

On the other hand, if the Soviets reply with their own ultimatum, Mr. Nixon in his turn will be put in the position of having to acquiesce or raise the stakes. Mining the harbors, in short, offers as much risk and as little hope as it ever did; it is not a policy or a strategy so much as a dangerous, desperate gamble to retrieve a war that is all but lost. It is one more search for a quick fix that will redeem all other failures.

As for Dr. Kissinger's despairing inquiry why the North Vietnamese should not accept the President's latest cease-fire and withdrawal proposal, the answer is that it would leave the Saigon Government and its army and administrative machinery intact, which is scarcely Hanoi's aim; and it would point straight to a new and only slightly improved version of the Indochinese partition against which Hanoi has fought so long and so hard.

The real question, which Dr. Kissinger did not ask, is what makes Mr. Nixon think he can gain "withdrawal with honor," while maintaining an American-supported, non-Communist Government in Saigon, when he has not been able to win the war on the battlefield? There, despite all the President's pretensions, is where the real decisions have been made.